Rowe Raps FBI, Alabama Police

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By Howell Raines
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Gary Thomas Rowe Jr. has charged that vendettas being carried out against him by Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Birmingham Police Department are responsible for accusations that he participated in racial murders while on the FBI payroll as the chief paid informer within the Klu Klux Klan in Alabama in the early 1960s.

In interviews with The New York Times in Atlanta, Rowe vowed to fight extradition to Alabama if he is indicted next week for murder in the shooting of Viola Gregg Liuzzo, a civil rights marcher whose death in 1965 brought Rowe to national prominence as the federal government's star witness against Klan terrorists.

The district attorney of Lowndes County, Ala., has promised he will seek a murder indictment against Rowe before a grand jury that convenes on Sept. 18. The district attorney, Jesse O. Bryan, said in a telephone interview he will present two new witnesses — a Birmingham policeman and a former policeman — who will testify they heard Rowe boast he shot Mrs. Liuzzo. Also, two Birmingham Klansman convicted on federal conspiracy charges in Mrs. Liuzzo's death — largely as a result of Rowe's testimony against them — will testify Rowe fired the murder weapon, Bryan said.

"They are absolute liars," Rowe said of the Klansman. "It's absolutely nothing in the world but revenge. Why have these men waited 13 years to say, 'I did not do it. Rowe did it.'?"

Insisting on his innocence, Rowe accused the FBI and Birmingham police of seeking revenge, too. The FBI has abandoned him to belated prosecution, Rowe charged, because he "embarrassed the Bureau" by telling the Senate Intelligence Committee in 1975 that agents in the Birmingham FBI office approved his participation in planned violence as a necessary part of his undercover work. Birmingham police are out to get him, Rowe added, because he also testified that police officers helped Klansmen plan the attack on the Freedom Riders at a Birmingham bus station in 1961.

'ABSOLUTE LIARS'
Gary Thomas Rowe Jr.

"I'm between the devil and the deep blue sea. They've come down on me from both sides." said Rowe. He accused the FBI of reneging on its promise of lifetime protection in return for his testimony against Collie Leroy Wilkins and Eugene Thomas, the Klansmen convicted in 1966 in the Liuzzo case.

"The bureau has gone on to other things, and I have paid dearly," Rowe said. "I have suffered. I have cried, and now I am facing murder. Can you believe it, can you believe that? It's like a nightmare."

Fear of prosecution and assassination by his former associates in the Klan, Rowe said, has brought him and his wife to the point of nervous collapse. Now working for a private security agency under the new identity provided him by the FBI, the 45-year-old former nightclub bouncer said his life would be in danger if his exact location were revealed.

Rowe has retained an Alabama attorney to represent him in the Liuzzo matter, but his legal difficulties do not end there. His activities during the five years of 1960 to 1965 when he was paid by the FBI to monitor Klan "action squads" are under investigation by the Justice Department, as well as by the Birmingham police.

The New York Times reported in July that Rowe registered "deception responses" in polygraph — lie detector — tests in which he denied involvement in the 1963 bombing that killed four black children at 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. The Times also reported Rowe had told Alabama investigators that he shot and killed a black man during a race riot in Birmingham in 1963 and was told by his FBI "control" agent to keep quiet about the incident.

Shortly after the disclosure, the Justice Department began its investigation at the request of members of Senate Judiciary Committee, which is drafting a new charter for the FBI. Among other things, the committee is considering whether the agency should be restricted in its use of paid informants.

Despite the polygraph results, Rowe denied any involvement in the church bombing. He said the shooting he described was in self-defense and duly reported to — and ignored by — Birmingham police officers and FBI agents.

Rowe had been on the FBI payroll as an undercover informer for about five years in March, 1965, when he accompanied three Klansmen — Wilkins, Thomas and the late William O. Eaton — to Lowndes County at the time of the Selma to Montgomery march. In two state murder trials and a federal conspiracy trial, Rowe testified that Wilkins shot Mrs. Liuzzo to death when the four men chased down her car on a lonely stretch of highway near Hayneville in Lowndes County.